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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2019  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [KWMN](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#)  
SY  
SUBJECT: A SUNNI GAMBIT? PM UTRI'S PROPOSED "NEW" PERSONAL  
STATUS LAW

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00474  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00492

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: After provoking another controversial debate on religious freedom and women's issues by attempting to amend the Personal Status Law (PSL) in April, Prime Minister Muhammad Naji al-Utri has again introduced a draft that closely mirrors the current PSL from 1953. Some contacts suggest Utri's latest attempt to push the law reflects a growing "Wahabi-friendly" power center that seeks to supplant Iran's conservative Shi'a influence. The PSL, which was drafted by a secret committee, was sent this week to the leaders of major Christian churches with a request for comment by November 19. Local intellectuals have teamed up with NGOs to launch a counter-attack against the measure. Opponents contend the law reaffirms a conservative view of society that women's rights activists have tried to amend for years. Catholic leaders view the law as an attempt to undermine the separate "spiritual courts" that they fought so hard to get established. End Summary.

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The New Law...  
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[1](#)2. (C) Maan Abdul Salam (strictly protect), the founding director of MEPI-supported Etana Press and the organizing force behind the reform-minded, women's issues webzine "Thara" ([www.Thara-sy.com](http://www.Thara-sy.com)), told us November 16 that Prime Minister Utri had begun circulating a new draft PSL that closely mirrors the current PSL of 1953, and would reaffirm Syria's commitment to the Hanafi school of Islam's interpretation of personal status issues. Passage of the law, critics argue, would also undermine years of work by women's rights and civil society activists to amend the 1953 PSL with measures to abolish discrimination against women.

[1](#)3. (C) Utri's latest effort comes after his failed bid to pass a much more conservative draft Personal Status Law earlier this year (reftels). The earlier PSL draft, introduced in April, provoked such outrage among women's groups, religious leaders, and civil society activists that Parliament purportedly "canceled" it. This newest revised iteration, sent to religious leaders this month, is less draconian in its measures than the April version and very

close to the current PSL. Though the drafting committee for the law remained a secret, Salam explained, PM Utri's main political allies were Minister of Justice Ahmed Hammoud Younes and the Minister of Religious Endowments, Muhammad Abdel Sattar al-Sayed.

14. (C) Opponents regard Utri's maneuver as an attempt by religious conservatives in and outside the government to circumvent debates over reforming the PSL. Many opponents claim amending the law is necessary in order to bring Syria in line with international agreements to which it is a signatory: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by Syria in 2003. If the new law is passed, Salam said, it will take another 15 to 20 years to reform it.

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...And Its Opponents  
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15. (C) Six local NGOs, including the Syrian Women's League, the Women's Initiative, and the Association for Women's Role Development, have formed a loose coalition along with Salam and "Thara" to attack the draft law on three different levels, Salam said. First, using Thara as a base, the coalition will promote a media blitz aimed at drawing public attention to the law. Second, the group will seek signatures from 200 intellectuals, artists, writers, and other civil society figures for a petition of protest to be sent to President Asad. Salam said he had a secure communication channel to the palace. Finally, Salam and company have begun

amassing research on how the Personal Status Law (1) is unconstitutional; (2) is anti-Christian; (3) violates international law and specific international agreements to which Syria is a signatory; and (4) will undermine the partnership between Europe and Syria, specifically the pending EU Association Agreement.

16. (C) Salam expected Christian leaders would assemble this week to orchestrate their comments and, Salam believed, their opposition. The President of the Catholic Court, which oversees civil law on marriage, inheritance, adoption, and divorce for Catholics, told Salam the new law would weaken the church's hard-won 2006 Presidential decree authorizing special Catholic status and allowing the church to make legal rulings on "family issues."

17. (C) Especially disconcerting to Salam and his coalition is the suspected intensification of conservative Sunni influence at the local and state levels. Salam identified conservative Sunni cleric Dr. Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti as backing PM Utri and the law. Bouti is one of the four most influential clerics in the country. A former dean of the Shari'a School at Damascus University, Bouti fled Syria in the 1970s for fear of SARG reprisals based on his support for the Muslim Brotherhood. After a couple of years abroad, Bouti returned and made amends with the SARG and became a vocal advocate of the regime. He is a regular guest on satellite channel talk shows, where he is considered to be a "hardliner," according to contacts.

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Sunni vs. Shi'a?  
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18. (C) Salam argued that the religious and political leaders pushing the law were endeavoring to drive a wedge between the regime and Iran, which has been widely viewed as spending lots of money to expand the Shia presence in Syria. PM Utri and al-Bouti were all, Salam continued, oriented toward promoting a Wahabist-like version of Sunni Islam in Syria, and to promote Saudi Arabia's influence as a counter to Iran's. He said these leaders had seized on a "crack" in Syria's relationship with Iran. When asked what that "crack" might be, Salam noted Syria's opposition to Iranian-backed Huthi rebels in Yemen. He had also heard directly from a

presidential advisor that the SARG was certain of Iran's role in Yemen. This certainty combined with their disapproval of Huthi attacks pointed to a serious divide between the SARG and Iran. He added King Abdullah's visit, in the eyes of Utri and others, signaled the SARG's general desire to distance itself from Iran; hence a new conservative Sunni PSL might be a way to curry favor with the King.

19. (C) Comment: Twice this year PM Utri has attempted to pass a PSL regarded as outmoded and discriminatory toward women. Since the new law closely resembles the 1953 version, Utri's action begs the question of "why?" One answer is that with the moderate Sunni cleric Salah Kuftaro in jail, Utri's chances of getting the law enacted are better than they were this summer. Another could be a desire to avenge his earlier defeat. Whatever the case, we expect opposition to the law will be strong and well organized. Given Utri's illness and the ongoing behind-the-curtain power struggle as individuals jockey for position to replace him, the fight over the PSL may also prove a measure of how much power Utri still wields.  
HUNTER